For the Beginning of Eternity: Theology in Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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April 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2012

Abstract

Composed during World War II in a German prison camp, Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* is one of his most well-known works. Because of the circumstances under which it was written, the composer's use of innovative compositional techniques, and his inclusion of theology in the piece, it provides fertile ground for musicological research. In this paper, I discuss the history of the work and its first performance, Messiaen's philosophy regarding the concept of time versus eternity, and how his philosophy is manifested in the piece.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Peter Opie for taking the role as my advisor for this project and for countless other projects and performances over the past four years. His direction has proved instrumental to my success as a student and musician.

I would also like to thank Dr. Heather Platt and Dr. Murray Steib for teaching such engaging music history classes. Their help not only taught me to be a better writer, but inspired me to take a special interest in the study of music history.

It takes a special kind of mind to be able to create a work of art capable of inspiring awe in those who experience it. Composer Olivier Messiaen did just that with *Quatour pour la fin du Temps*, or *Quartet for the End of Time* which was written and premiered while he was a prisoner-of-war in a German prison camp during World War II. In the following paper, I will discuss the mind that created this monumental work, specifically in terms of Messiaen's personal philosophy regarding the integration of music and theology. I will begin with a short outline of the composer's life, followed by a description of the unusual circumstances under which the *Quartet* was written. Then I will discuss Messiaen's philosophy in regard to his religion and compositional technique, and explain how this philosophy is present in each movement of the piece.

Biography

Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon, France on December 10, 1908. From an early age, he began to show interest in music, teaching himself to play an old piano in his uncle's house. He would request operatic vocal scores as his Christmas presents and would be heard singing performances of the works in their entirety.[1] He began composing shortly after learning to play the piano. The family moved to Nantes after his father returned from serving in World War I, and Messiaen was able to begin formal music study. He had several teachers in Nantes, some of which taught him for free due to his exceptional abilities. Six months later, the family moved to Paris where Messiaen was enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire at the young age of ten. He was also profoundly influenced by the cultural experiences that the city had to offer. He was taken on visits to the Louvre, the Opéra and the Comédie Française. [2]

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[1]Christopher Philip Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen,* New York: Cambridge Universit y Press (2007), 7.
[2] Dingle, 10.

While studying at the Conservatoire, Messiaen began to study the organ at the request of his teacher, who believed he had exceptional improvisatory skills. Almost immediately, the instrument replaced the piano as his instrument of choice. As a student of the Conservatoire, his primary interest was never in performance, but rather composition, though he produced surprisingly few works during this time. Messiaen began his career as a musician in 1931. Due to political turmoil in France at the time, he suffered a period of financial instability, regardless of his high achievements at the Conservatoire. He was employed as an organist at Trinity Cathedral in Paris. As for his compositional goals, he maintained the same work ethic that earned him success while at school, and he produced several works including *Le Tombeau resplendissant* (1931), *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* (1932), and *L'Ascension* (1933).[3] While not fulfilling commissions, he composed mainly for orchestra during this period so that he would be recognized as a serious composer. He began teaching at the École Normale de Musique until the outbreak of war in 1939.[4]

Messiaen was drafted into the French Army following the outbreak of World War II. In 1940, he was captured at Verdun and imprisoned in Stalag VIII-A in Görlitz. Imprisoned with him were cellist Étienne Pasquier, clarinetist Henri Akoka and violinist Jean Le Boulaire. It was here that one of his best known works, *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* (1941), was composed. Following his release in March 1941, Messiaen returned to Paris where he took a position teaching harmony at the Conservatoire and he taught until his retirement in 1978. He continued

[3] Dingle, 34.
[4] Dingle, 45.

to compose after his retirement until his death in 1992 due to cancer and other health complications. [5]

History of the *Quartet for the End of Time*

Now I will turn to a discussion of the *Quartet for the End of Time* and the interesting circumstances under which it was written. While Messiaen may have spent less than a year as a prisoner-of-war, he made the most of his time by producing this defining work that would make a lasting impression on the musical community. Messiaen was fortunate not to have to serve in combat during the war due to his poor eyesight, so alternatively, he was placed in a medical position. Pasquier, who would later be his colleague, served in a similar position within the same camp. When they were captured in May 1940 and taken to Görlitz along with Akoka, they met Le Boulaire.

Akoka was allowed to keep his instrument after his capture, and Le Boulaire was able to secure a violin at the prison camp. After a collection was taken up by the other prisoners, Pasquier was taken out of the camp to purchase a cello at a shop in Görlitz.[6] Messiaen himself was allowed to keep some pocket scores he had carried with him, and was given manuscript paper and pencils by the German soldiers. He was later provided with an old upright piano. The reason for the special treatment of these four musicians is unknown, but may have been because they were not perceived as a threat by the Germans, being musicians rather than trained combatants. [7] When recalling his time in the prison, Messiaen tended to place a great deal of emphasis on the condition of the instruments the players used during the first performance of the

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[5] Dingle, 239.

[6] Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press (2003), 33.

[7] Anthony Pople, *Quatour pour la fin du Temps,* New York: Cambridge University Press (1998), 7.

piece, even going as far as to exaggerate their brokenness. For instance, he would say that Pasquier's cello had only three strings, but in an interview, Pasquier confirmed that this was in fact not true, and that the cello had the full set of four strings. [8]

In general, musicians in Stalag VIII-A and other German camps were treated better than other prisoners. For instance, musicians were often not required to do the hardest manual labor within the camp, but given the least objectionable tasks, like cooking or laundering. Pasquier had the special privilege of working as a cook where he was able to steal food on occasion. Once his captors found out he was a composer, Messiaen was relieved from prisoners' duties and given time to compose. Sometimes a guard was even placed at the door of his barracks to prevent others from disturbing him while he worked. The reason for the special treatment of musicians in the camps may have been because of the German peoples' long-standing musical tradition. Also, allowing musicians time and resources to work in the camps provided an opportunity for the Germans to give the impression, in the form of propaganda, that they were treating their prisoners well.[9]

It may seem at first glance that life was not so bad for these four musicians in Stalag VIII-A, but the living conditions in the prison camp were abysmal. One of the greatest hardships for Messiaen was hunger, as the prisoners were given very little to eat. When Messiaen and his companions arrived at the camp, there was an extreme food shortage due to the sudden influx of prisoners.[10] The lack of food caused him to have vivid dreams where he saw visions of the Apocalypse as told in the Book of Revelation. These dreams, combined with his belief that the prophecies in the Bible are true, led him to believe that the prophecies were unfolding before his

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[8] Dingle, 73.
[9] Rischin, 27.
[10] Rischin, 23.

eyes.[11] He decided to funnel his concerns into a musical composition. Before he had been given a piano, Messiaen composed the *Intermède*, which would later become the fourth movement of the *Quartet*, for the three other musicians. It was first performed in a washroom for other prisoners. He then added seven more movements and a piano part. The four musicians spent the next few months rehearsing.[12]

There has been some dispute over the order in which the movements were written. Messiaen himself, when discussing the piece, seemed to point to the *Interméde* as the first movement he composed, but accounts from Akoka and Pasquier say otherwise. Before Messiaen, Pasquier and Akoka were sent to Stalag VIII-A, Messiaen wrote a piece for solo clarinet, *Abîme des oiseaux*, which would later become the third movement of the *Quartet*. The reason that Messiaen said the *Interméde* was composed first in unknown, but may have been because he did not want to emphasize the clarinet as more important than the other instruments.[13] In addition, the fifth and eighth movements of the piece, *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus* for cello and piano, and *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus* for violin and piano, were reworked from pieces Messiaen had written in the previous decade. He never said why he used previously composed material for these movements, but it may have been because he was rushed to finish the piece. His choice to feature the cello and violin in these movements may stem from a desire to balance the importance of each instrument in the quartet, since the clarinet was given a solo movement.[14]

One of the barracks in the camp had been turned into a theater for plays, concerts and movies with wooden benches that could seat around four hundred people. This was the space

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[11] Dingle, 70.
[12] Dingle, 72.
[13] Rischin, 18.
[14] Rischin, 19.

where the *Quartet* was premiered on January 15, 1941. In the preceding months, the musicians struggled to learn the piece with limited rehearsal time, about four hours a day including individual practice time. Each part by itself was difficult, and then putting it together as a quartet had its own set of problems. When the piece was finally ready for performance, the camp commandant went to extra measures to ensure it was heard. Programs were printed and distributed before the performance to urge prisoners to come. Even prisoners from the quarantine section of the camp were permitted to attend. Recalling the event, Messiaen said there were five thousand in attendance, but given the size of the theater, and the number of people in that part of the camp at the time, this was not possible. The other musicians approximated that there were between three and four hundred listeners. [15]

The performers entered the stage in wooden clogs and tattered uniforms. Before the performance began, Messiaen spoke to the audience about the piece and the ideas that inspired it, namely, the end of time and beginning of eternity. He defined eternity as the absence of time rather than the sum of all time, past, present and future. The performance of the piece was followed by hesitant applause. Those in attendance had a mixed response to it. In some ways, it was unlike anything they had ever heard, and for some prisoners, it offered an escape from the monotony and confines of the prison camp. While some puzzled over the piece, other sat in awe.[16]

Messiaen's Philosophy

Messiaen's religion profoundly influenced his philosophy of music and he used religious figures and events as subjects for many of his works. Messiaen was raised Catholic by his father,

[15] Rischin, 62.
[16] Rischin, 69.

and considered himself a devout believer. His faith was of utmost importance to him in expressing his musical ideology. In an interview with Claude Samuel, he said "a number of my works are intended to bring out the theological truths of the Catholic faith. That is the first aspect of my work, the noblest and, doubtless, the most useful and valuable; perhaps the only one which I won't regret at the hour of my death."[17] He also said "most of the arts are unsuited to the expression of religious truths: only music, the most immaterial of all, comes closest to it."[18] Additionally, Messiaen had a love of nature and birdsong, which would also find its way into his works. Although his religion was a key element in his compositions, Messiaen never wrote music to be used in a Catholic Mass or other service because he believed liturgical music should be restricted to plainchant and simpler types of music.[19]

Messiaen seems to have been obsessed with the idea of eternity. As mentioned earlier, he understood eternity as the absence, or end, of time rather than the sum of all time. To him, time was a constricting and human experience that the world would be freed of when it came to an end. He said "all God's creations are enclosed in Time, and Time is one of God's strangest creatures because it is totally opposed to Him who is Eternal by nature, to Him who is without beginning, end or succession." [20] Messiaen was influenced by the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas in his view of eternity, believing that time created movement and change, while eternity represented permanence and simultaneity.[21] He applied this idea to his treatment of rhythm in his music.

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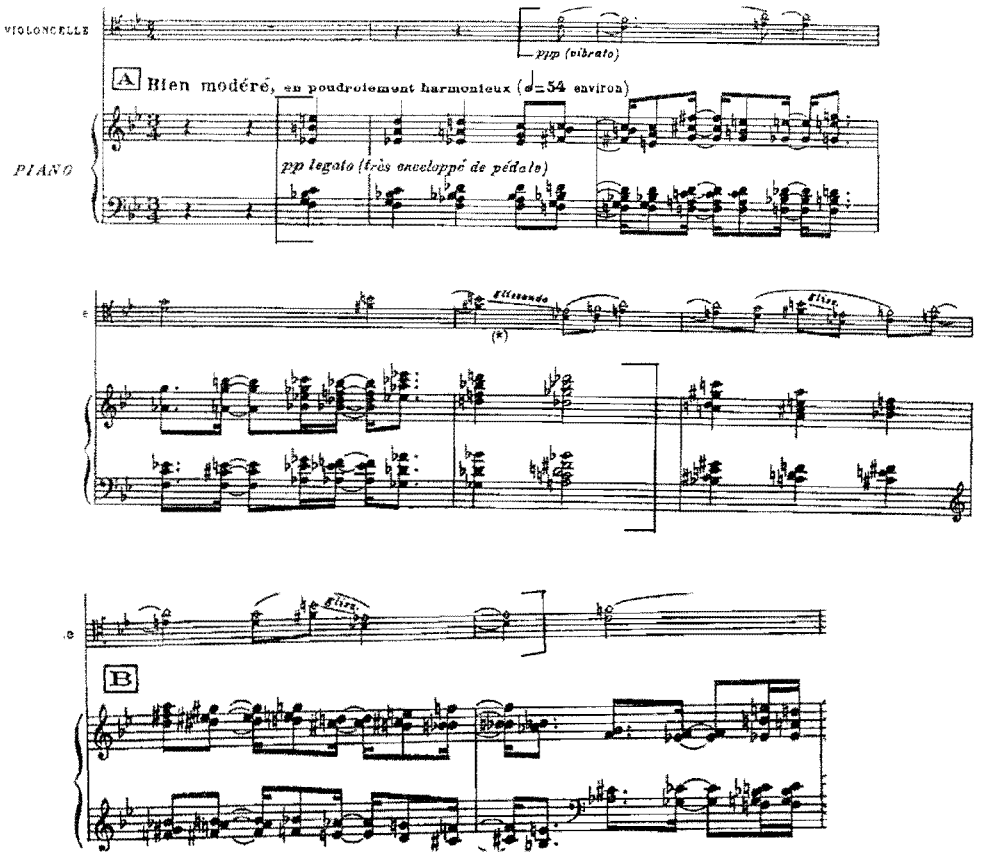
[17] Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, London: Stainer and Bell Ltd. (1976), 2.
[18] Samuel, 7.
[19] Siglind Bruhn, "Traces of a Thomistic *De Musica* in the Compositions of Olivier Messiaen," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 11 (2008), 21.
[20] Samuel, 11.
[21] Vincent Benitez, "Reconsidering Messiaen as a Serialist," *Music Analysis* 28 (2009), 270.

Messiaen despised traditional concepts of rhythm, rejecting the idea that rhythm should be used to move a piece of music forward. So, he sought to create a sense of timelessness, a sense of eternity, by changing the role of rhythm. He did this is several ways. One way that he controlled rhythm to evoke a sense of timelessness was by using rhythms that did not seem to have a sense of direction. In many types of music, rhythm is used to push a piece forward to the end of a phrase or to a natural stopping point. Messiaen hoped to counter this idea by writing rhythms that seemed to go nowhere, and that did not give a sense of finality or movement.[22]

He uses this technique in the first movement of the *Quartet for the End of Time*. The first movement consists of rhythmic ostinatos, rhythmic patterns that are repeated over and over, in the cello and piano parts that are not synchronized with each other and follow no specific pattern of entry and release in relation to the other parts. For instance the piano plays a specific pattern of rhythm, a duration of thirteen beats each time, nine complete times, and then cuts off in the middle for the last statement of it at the end of the movement. The cello plays another pattern of rhythm with a duration of sixteen and a half beats. See Example 1 for the first statement of each rhythm. The beginning and end of each statement is marked with a bracket. Above these rhythmic ostinatos, the violin and clarinet play intermittent notes that sound like bird calls.

[22] Benitez, 267.

Example 1: Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of Time, Crystal Liturgy*, mm. 1-8.



Another way that Messiaen controls the rhythms in his works with the use of serialized and non-retrogradable or pantomime rhythms. Serialized rhythm, in Messiaen's case, is a term that refers to a predetermined progression of note values that together form a cell or unit that can be used repeatedly in a work of music. A cell can be used in its original form, in augmentation (that is, have the note values doubled, tripled, etc.), or in diminution (have the note values halved, quartered, etc.).Serialized rhythm does not necessarily follow the forward motion of traditional rhythm because it is determined by different rules. Messiaen drew further on this idea by also creating non-retogradable rhythms, rhythms that sounded the same played forward as played backward, thinking that this also would reflect eternity, which he believed to move

neither forward nor backward. So too, there would be no distinction between a given non-retrogradable rhythm played forward and the same one played backward. [23] Also reflected in his use of non-retrogradable rhythms is his interest in symmetry found in nature. He had a great admiration for the symmetry found in the natural world, considering it to be the beauty of God's creation. Non-retrogradable rhythms, being symmetrical by definition, were made more meaningful to him because of the fact.[24]

In addition to his incorporation of his religion into his music, Messiaen seemed to have reached a certain level of mysticism in the way he viewed the world. He would interpret the events in his life as if they were divinely inspired. For instance, his mother, Cécile Sauvage, was a poet and in her poetry she would write about her son, often making predictions about his future. She predicted in her poems that he would be a composer, ornithologist and have a love for Japan, all of which turned out to be true. Though his mother was not religious, Messiaen considered her to be somewhat of a visionary, and it gave him a sense of wonder.[25]

There were also several events involving the *Quartet for the End of Time* that Messiaen interpreted as religious symbols. As mentioned earlier, he had visions of the Apocalypse in his dreams while suffering hunger in the prison camp. It may have been the extreme hunger setting in, but his belief during that time that the events portrayed in the Book of Revelation were coming to be indicates something beyond simple devotion to his faith. It inspired him to write the *Quartet*, and even when he came to realize that the end of time was not upon the world, he still believed he had created a powerful work of art that greatly influenced those who heard it at the premiere.

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[23] Benitez, 268.
[24] Bruhn, 24.
[25] Dingle, 2.

He also liked to bend the truth when recounting the events surrounding the performance of the *Quartet* in order to make the ordeal seem more miraculous than it probably was. This is not to say that Messiaen and his fellow musicians should not be commended for their work and effort in a difficult situation. However, Messiaen was not entirely truthful when he would talk about how the cello only had three strings, and that the other instruments were broken and hardly playable. The other musicians have said otherwise, but it seemed to give Messiaen satisfaction to create these myths. Another example is that he said there were five thousand people at the premiere, which has also proven false. He likened the size of the audience to the biblical five thousand that Jesus fed with five loaves and two fish according to the gospels of the Bible.[26]

Messiaen's Theology in the *Quartet for the End of Time*

Finally, I will include a discussion of the *Quartet for the End of Time* regarding the theological basis for it. Messiaen wrote descriptions for each movement to describe what images each of the movements represents. The first movement, *Liturgie de cristal* or Crystal Liturgy, appropriately opens the work because it evokes the sense of early morning when the birds have just awoken. Messiaen wrote:

> "Between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning, the birds awaken: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by dustwhirls of sound, by a halo of harmonics lost high up in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane: you have the harmonious silence of heaven."[27]

As an ornithologist, Messiaen would study songs of birds and dictate the rhythm and pitches of their calls into musical notation. The violin in this movement represents the song of a nightingale, and the clarinet represents a blackbird. These two voices are playing over the

[26] Dingle, 74.
[27] Rischin, 129.

rhythmic ostinatos in the cello and piano that were discussed earlier. The cello and piano, with their ostinatos, are meant to represent Heaven, suggesting a sense of eternity with their continuous feel, seeming to be without beginning or end. [28]

The second movement, *Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps*, or *Vocalise, for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time*, is scored for the entire quartet. Messiaen wrote:

> "The first and third sections (both very brief) evoke the power of this mighty angel, crowned with a rainbow and clothed in a cloud, who places one foot on the sea and the other on the land. The "middle" evokes the impalpable harmonies of heaven. In the piano: gentle cascades of blue-orange chords, encircling with their distant carillon the plainchant-like song of the violin and cello."[29]

As the title states, the movement represents this angel who announces the end of time through song. A vocalise is typically defined as a work sung by a singer, but without words. The singer would sing the melody on a single syllable in most cases. In this case, however, the vocalise is not being sung, but played on instruments. Messiaen's choice to identify this movement as a vocalise suggests that the quartet represents the angel's actual voice, rather than that the quartet reflects the event of the angel announcing the end of time.[30] In the middle section, Messiaen experiments with creating musical color with the chords of the piano, a technique that was used by other composers, such as Debussy. [31]

The third movement for solo clarinet, *Abîme des oiseaux*, or *Abyss of the Birds*, again represents Messiaen's idea about the concept of time. He writes:

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[28] Pople, 18.
[29] Rischin, 130.
[30] Pople, 28.
[31] Pople, 34.

> "Unaccompanied clarinet. The abyss is Time, with its weariness and gloom. The birds are the opposite of Time; they represent our longing for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song!"[32]

While Messiaen does not directly say so, one can infer that he is drawing on the image of an abyss from the Book of Revelation that is opened by the fifth angel of the Apolcalypse. He juxtaposes the image of time, which is oppressive and binding, like the confines of the prison camp, with the image of birds, which he believes to represent freedom and escape from the confines of time.[33]

The *Interméde*, or *Interlude*, is the fourth movement of the work scored for violin, clarinet and cello. Messiaen writes:

> "Scherzo, in a more outgoing character than the other movements, yet related to them nevertheless by melodic 'recalls'."[34]

This movement, originally composed as a freestanding piece, does not refer to any element of the Apocalypse as do the other movements. Messiaen included it as turning point in the *Quartet.* It contrasts the preceding movements in character, with its fast tempo and uplifting mood, but also prepares the listener for the movements that follow because they themselves take on a different and more uplifting character than the first three. Unlike the other movements, this movement employs traditional rhythms and phrasing, which furthers the contrast.[35]

The fifth movement, *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus*, or *Praise to the Eternity of Jesus* is scored for cello and piano. Messiaen writes:

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[32] Rischin, 130.
[33] Pople, 40.
[34] Rischin, 130.
[35] Pople, 47.

> "Here, Jesus is considered the Word of God. A long phrase in the cello, inexorably slow, glorifies, with adoration and reverence, the eternity of this mighty yet gentle Word, 'of which the ages never tire.' The melody unfolds majestically, as if from a regal yet soft-colored horizon. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'"[36]

Knowing that this movement was reworked from an earlier composition, *Fête des belles eaux* (1937), one might assume that Messiaen had to reassign the meaning of it in order for it to fit within the context of the *Quartet*. However, the subject matter in the original piece was similar. The piece was meant to represent the grace and eternity of water, a theme that was fitting for the exhibition which took place on the Seine River at night. So the theme of each of the pieces was not so different, and Messiaen was able to successfully incorporate this earlier-composed material into the *Quartet.* The prayer-like melody of the cello reflects the eternal Word of Christ just as the same melody reflected the grace and eternity of water in its original commission.[37]

The sixth and seventh movements, *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* (*Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets*) and *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (*Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time*), take on a different character and together represent the climax of the *Quartet.* Messiaen writes:

> 6. "Rhythmically, the most characteristic movement of this series. The four instruments in unison create the effect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse followed by various calamities, the trumpet of the seventh angel announcing the fulfillment of the mystery of God)…Music of stone , tremendous ringing granite; perpetual motion of steel, of enormous blocks of purple fury, of frozen intoxication."

[36] Rischin, 130.
[37] Pople, 54.

> 7. "The Angel of might appears, and in particular the rainbow that crowns him (the rainbow, symbol of peace, of wisdom, and of every luminous sound and vibration)…I pass into unreality and lose myself in a rapture to a whirling, a gyrating fusion of superhuman sound and color. These swords on fire, these pools of blue-orange lava, these shooting stars: this is the tangled skein, these are the rainbows!"[38]

These descriptions paint a very vivid picture of the scenes Messiaen wanted to capture with these movements. Messiaen attempts to convey this message in both movements with some of the rhythmic techniques described earlier in this paper. He uses augmentation, diminution and non-retrogradable rhythms.[39] An example of his use of a non-retrogradable rhythm can be seen in Example 2 from the seventh movement. Notice the rhythm in the violin and cello parts. If one were to assign numbers to the duration of the notes, with the unit of measure being the sixteenth note, the rhythm is this passage could be said to be 111112211111, which is a palindrome. This technique, together with the others creates a sense of chaos in this movement. Messiaen also uses a development technique, using the same rhythm throughout the piece but changing it slightly each time, to create a sense of whirring colors in the seventh movement.[40]

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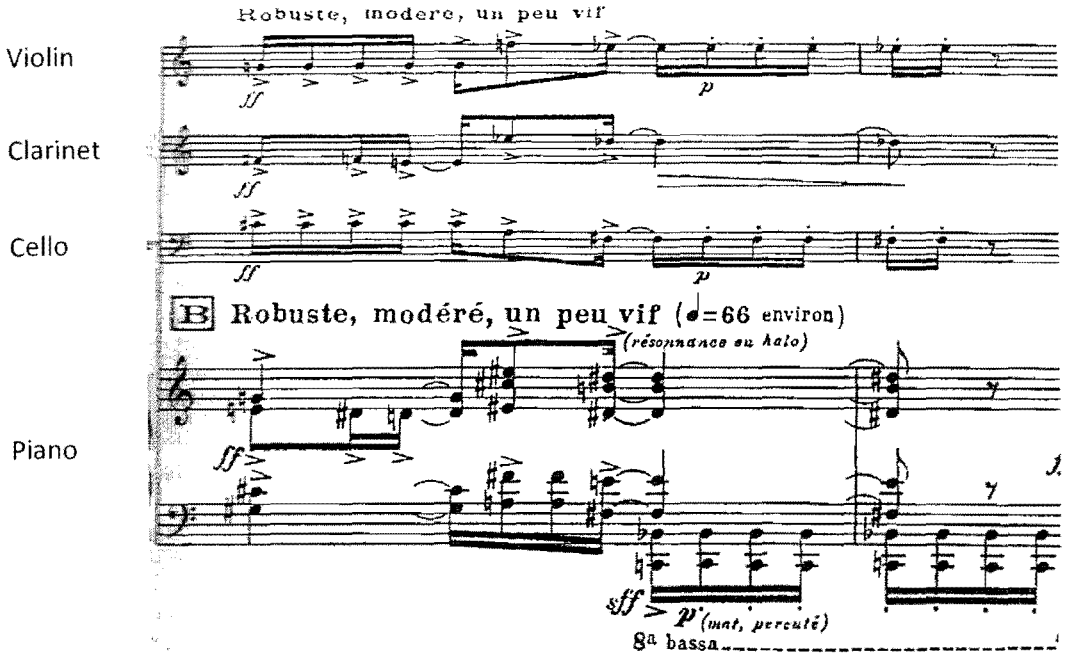
[38] Rischin, 130.
[39] Pople, 64.
[40] Pople, 72.

Example 2: Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of Time*, *Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time*, mm. 13-14.



The *Quartet* ends with another slow movement, *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus*, or *Praise to the Immortality of Jesus* for violin and piano. This movement is similar in character to the fifth movement and evokes a similar image. Messiaen writes:

> "Why this second eulogy? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus: Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh, immortality resurrected, to impart us his life. This movement is pure love."[41]

This movement too was transcribed from an earlier composition, *Diptyque* (1930). The subtitle of that work was "Essay on Earthly Life and Blessed Eternity," so this too relates to the subject matter of the *Quartet* in that it is concerned with the transformation from mortal to immortal.[42]

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[41] Rischin, 131.
[42] Pople, 81.

As the movement progresses. the violin moves into its highest register. Messiaen meant for this to represent the ascension of man toward God and toward Paradise.[43]

The *Quartet for the End of Time* in many ways represents the music can be used to take oneself away from the gloom and weariness of life. It also shows how creative minds can band together and with very little resources create something so profound as to influence the minds of generations to come. While Messiaen and his colleagues were fortunate to have access to a few resources at the prison camp, it in no way diminishes the miraculous deed they accomplished while imprisoned. Not only have they brought a great work of art into being, but they have also provided humanity with an interesting story to inspire future generations to persevere in times of hardship.

[43] Rischin, 131.

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